

The joys of revising a manuscript

Almost all of the papers published in refereed medical journals have been revised by the authors after they were submitted to the journal. Revising a paper takes discipline and organization^{1,2} but can be even more difficult when done at the behest of someone else. The author may, with some justification, see revision as enforced collaboration with a phantom team of critics and an unruly editor.

Minor revision usually involves one or more of three activities: providing additional information, deleting unnecessary material or exhibits and making minor corrections in either the numbers or the text. Additional information most frequently requested for clinical studies is more detailed description of the patient population and the selection process. For case reports, reviewers often ask for more information on the laboratory studies, alternative explanations and the rationale for certain tests or maneuvers. They often comment that a paper is longer than need be and suggest ways of shortening it: tightening up the language, deleting tables that are covered in the text and cutting back on the introduction and discussion. Editors are invariably grateful for such suggestions. Authors are usually glad to comply with proposals for minor revision; as with any other work, the easier the task, the more likely it is to be done quickly and cheerfully.

Manuscripts returned from minor revision can be surprisingly hard for the editor to deal

with. Some authors seem to be more concerned with producing clean copy than with explaining what they have done: they send a curt letter with the revised manuscript saying that all the changes have been carried out, but the new manuscript looks just like the old one. The editor is amazed to find, after painstakingly rereading the paper, that the authors have done invisible mending, changing a phrase here and there, sometimes without even altering the length of the lines. The intended impression is that the paper was so nearly perfect to begin with that any change would be a blemish. Equally frustrating, the entire paper may have been retyped or printed out again, with different margins, so that the editor again has to hunt down the changes. The considerate author sends along a covering letter explaining what changes were made and why, and telling the editor where they were made in the revised text. *CMAJ* welcomes minor corrections made neatly by hand on the original manuscript: they are easy to find, and it is immediately obvious what has been done.

Major revision adds a more fundamental reorganization of the paper. Sometimes this may necessitate only moving parts of the text around: results and discussion are frequently intermingled and have to be segregated. Perhaps the most challenging request for revision arises when two or three reviewers strongly urge the authors to revise a fundamentally sound paper but present long and nonoverlapping lists of suggestions for revision.

The encouragement the authors receive soon dwindles in the drudgery of extensive rewriting, reconsidering the relation between the hypothesis and the method, and even reviewing and reanalysing the data. Before beginning this chore the research team must consult and should prepare a response that does three things: comments in general terms on the reviewers' critiques, rebuts the critiques that the authors do not accept, and acknowledges — and pinpoints — the changes in the revised paper. The role of the corresponding author does not necessarily entail the responsibility of revising the paper, but this author can render the others a great service by writing a comprehensive and coherent letter to accompany the revised manuscript. These letters, especially if they offer lively rebuttals, are often of high intellectual and literary quality — good reading that one editor recently shared with his readers.³

Getting authors to revise papers successfully may be the greatest contribution a journal can make to improving scientific communication.

Peter P. Morgan, MD
Scientific editor

References

1. Morgan PP: First write it down, then write it up [C]. *Can Med Assoc J* 1983; 129: 404
2. Idem: Writing — and recognizing — the final draft of a manuscript [C]. *Ibid*: 1254
3. Peer review at work. *Br Med J* 1985; 290: 1555-1561